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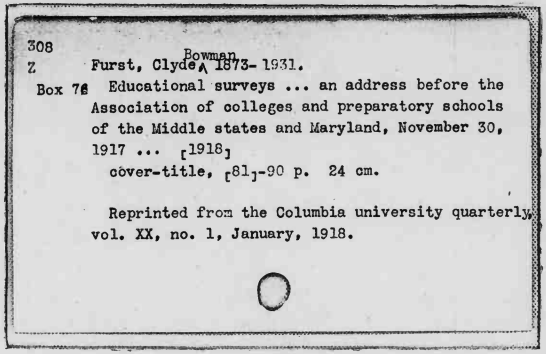

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Educational Surveys

By Clyde Furst

Secretary of the Carnegie Foundation
For the Advancement of Teaching

An address before the
Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools
of the Middle States and Maryland
November 30, 1917

Reprinted from the Columbia University Quarterly
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EDUCATIONAL SURVEYS

The arts and sciences, from archaeology to zoology, have long been accustomed to send out expeditions to study facts and conditions in the field. More recently the social sciences have adopted this procedure. Lately the science of education has profited by this means of increasing its body of knowledge and doctrine, in the form that we know as a survey.

I

The theory and practise of inspection by an outside authority have long been approved and adopted by armies and navies, in the arts and letters, in manufacture, commerce and finance, and by the educational systems of almost every country other than our own. Such aid, however, was definitely rejected by education in the United States until it was indirectly employed in the cooperative activities of the college entrance examination and certificate boards, of the regional associations of schools and colleges, and of professional organizations like the American Medical Association. The accomplishment of these bodies made it evident that the results of disinterested, expert appraisal of educational phenomena were so valuable that the process, instead of being avoided, deserved hearty approval and general application. The new educational and social foundations, moreover, soon after their establishment entered upon studies of their fields, which, carried out with adequate resources and unhampered by local or institutional limitations, resulted in surveys that were of conspicuous public service. Immediately thereafter, with one of the complete revulsions that are characteristic of education in the United States, institutions, school systems, and state and federal educational authorities began with one accord to commend and demand and produce surveys. Appearing at the rate of first a dozen, then a score, now a hundred a year, their end is not yet. In short, surveys have become the spring style in education, with the demand far exceeding the supply.

Whenever and wherever demand exceeds supply, adulteration is likely to occur. This situation has already arisen in the making of educational surveys. Whereas few methods of ascertaining truth are superior to the direct and careful scrutiny of facts by competent, experienced and judicious observers, the number of such observers is strictly limited, and more than one survey has already yielded to the temptation to employ quicker and more easily available methods. The questionnaire has blossomed into a new popularity, in spite of its deserved reputation for yielding inaccurate and unrepresentative results. A recent study generalized concerning the teachers of the entire nation on the basis of replies from one-fifth of the teachers in a single state. Unjustifiable faith, also, is being placed in statistical methods when employed by the trustful and inexperienced. Figures are being studied instead of educational facts, although the reported attendance at almost all schools, colleges, and universities is based, not on the actual number of students in residence, but on the total number of those who have registered at any time during the year. We revel in averages, forgetting that they obscure the best and the worst features of any situation. Having achieved statistics, we fail to interpret them. Does dropping one-half of a freshman class for poor work mean that the standard of teaching is high, or that the standard of admission is low? Does a generous per capita expenditure and a small number of graduates mean that an institution is exceptionally effective, or that it is blundering and wasteful? There is less danger in employing tests and scales, of which the better surveys have made commendable use, basing upon them valuable impersonal conclusions, increasing the amount of material available for scientific study, and considerably advancing the development of the tests themselves. Yet here, also, the layman may easily err; for it remains to be proved that many popular tests, such as writing the opposites of words, really measure the kinds of ability and accomplishment that education seeks to promote.

We are on firmer ground in considering facts by means of the comparative method. This has long been employed successfully in other fields, and has long been used informally in educational studies, but never so thoroughly or so helpfully as in the formal

surveys. Comparison between classes has shown that marks in elective courses are higher than those in required courses. Comparison between teachers has shown that to some the mark of A represents unattainable perfection, while others religiously give A's to one-third of every class. Comparison between methods of admission has indicated that students who enter by examination do better work in college than those who enter by certificate. Comparison between institutions showed, a few years ago, that of students entering Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Princeton, less than half met the requirements for admission. Comparison between states has shown that New York has the most effective supervision of education, although not without a touch of bureaucracy; that in New Jersey and Virginia alone there is no state provision for the higher education of women; that Pennsylvania has more colleges than any other state, but that only a dozen states spend as little per student; that Maryland distributes public funds to more privately controlled institutions than any other state. Comparison of regions suggests inquiry as to why the Associations of Colleges and Secondary Schools of New England and of the Middle States admit any institution which desires their fellowship, while the North Central and the Southern Associations of Colleges and Secondary Schools have fixed requirements for admission, which have done much to raise academic standards throughout their regions. International comparisons remind us that education has no seat in our national cabinet, as it has in England, France and Italy. The repeated call to the premiership of the ministers of education in those countries indicates that the post commands the best available ability, which it deserves. In our government, on the other hand, education is represented by a minor bureau, subject, not to the encouragement, but to the restriction of a largely unrelated department—this in a country where the prestige and the problems of education are unparalleled. In short, it is obvious that surveys are most likely to be useful when they consider the facts in hand against the largest comparative background. In using the comparative method one must, of course, guard against the temptation to seek and recommend an artificial uniformity, to which we are already too prone, or to

attempt to transfer devices that are successful only where they are indigenous. When one survey reported that the schools of Baltimore had too little central supervision and another found that the schools of New York had too much, probably both were right. Variation is the source of evolution.

The danger that has just been mentioned is obviated by the historical method, a time-tested procedure which is almost essential in a thorough survey. The light of the past is indispensable for the illumination of the present. Only the historical method places in proper perspective the accomplishment of those disingenuous, but not uncommon, persons who quickly reform evils that are discovered and then claim a blameless record. The college which under public compulsion suddenly adopts respectable requirements is not, all claims to the contrary notwithstanding, so good as the college that has always had them. Some striking results are being obtained by continuing the work of a survey throughout a series of years. Apparently such continuity alone can bring about the reform of certain long-standing evils. A decade of discussion has failed to persuade the District of Columbia of the iniquity of the law that allows any half dozen persons, without fitness or resources, without formality other than a declaration of intention, to constitute themselves a university at the national capitol. It may take half a century of observation, record, and demonstration to remedy this abuse.

II

The multiplication of surveys has already stimulated an improvement in the presentation of data in periodical school reports, which have hitherto been so frequently unintelligent and unintelligible, and has generally increased the dissemination of accurate and vivid educational information. We depend so much upon print that anything which vitalizes this "very bloodless substitute for life" is more than welcome. Most of us who are engaged in education, moreover, are easily beset with the sin of taking the will for the deed, of mistaking intention for accomplishment, of being so absorbed with plans for the future that we do not realize the actual conditions of the present. There are common drinking

cups and inside bedrooms in our leading institutions. Surveys provide wholesome correction for all this, by their accurate and specific record of actual facts and conditions, their picture, to use a locution of the department stores, of education "as is."

The attention inevitably given by surveys to measurable results places a helpful emphasis upon aspects of education that are apt to be neglected, and this is true also of educational processes. The mere information contained in a comprehensive survey has more than once radically changed fundamental procedure. Thus Mr. Kingsley's study of college entrance requirements in 1913 has helped greatly to free secondary schools from the burden of preparing students to enter particular colleges, by providing a list of colleges which approve the studies that the schools themselves think it best to prescribe. Similarly, the publication by several southern states of the high-school records of all college freshmen has caused scores of colleges hastily to abandon their low and shifting entrance requirements.

Surveys are also testing and sometimes disproving a considerable number of educational ideas which have been adopted without sufficient evidence. Thus the ratings given by the engineering corporations to their employees who are college graduates were considered highly significant until they were shown by tests to be considerably less accurate than college marks. Detachment from controversial questions, so abundant in education, often enables a survey not only to solve local problems but also to provide evidence concerning the value or expediency of broader theories. Hence, although apparently immersed in the practical and immediate, surveys may make important contributions to educational philosophy.

How many teachers, moreover, need to be emancipated from the influence of the law of laziness, disguised as a comfortable conservatism, believing that whatever is, is right. One of the publications of the International Commission on the Teaching of Mathematics declared not long since that whoever understands that subject can teach it—an astounding assertion in this day of enlightenment concerning the theory and practise of teaching. Provided, however, that learning is actually advancing, we must

sometimes curb our impatience at her snail-like pace. It was really a decided gain when, after a survey, the department of economics at Harvard announced its discovery that students gain more when they are told to look for particular things in their reading—a hoary commonplace of educational method. Reforms cannot work faster than existing agencies will move.

Local history and tradition often build up complexities of organization, administration, and routine which have no reason behind them, yet completely subjugate those who are habituated to them. The outside observer, possessing what painters call "a fresh eye," can easily point out the unnecessary and often harmful character of such routine, and the honest administrator rewards him with a joy of emancipation which is often pathetic. I know of an instance in which a visitor in one day relieved a college office of ten thousand unnecessary operations.

Pressure of local conditions, also, often makes an institution accept as natural and inevitable situations which are obviously absurd or worse to the detached observer. Thus colleges which cannot see how to avoid giving more honorary than regular degrees or why the athletic coach should not have the control of forty scholarships, may be extricated from their predicaments by an authoritative statement of the generally accepted standards in such matters. Similarly informed and disinterested opinion may overcome the insistence of the treasurer of a suburban college that students should journey to his office in the city to pay their fees. A few generally known facts may convince those responsible for the conduct of an institution of their mistake in believing that fifteen thousand dollars will purchase the best engineering equipment in the country, or that fifty thousand dollars will endow a school of architecture, or that a million dollars will equip and endow graduate schools of commerce, education, engineering, jurisprudence, and public health.

One of the advantages that a survey may and usually does have, is its impersonality. Many unfortunate educational situations are due to the holding of important offices by those whose unsuitability is generally recognized, but whose entrenchment is secure against ordinary attack. In such circumstances an honest survey

is a powerful agent for reform. Its report will probably be attacked as partisan by the spoilsmen, and spoilsmen have occasionally used partisan surveys for their own purposes; but in general the survey of unquestionable integrity and competence has been an invincible weapon in freeing public welfare from subjection to private ambition and private gain. The children of darkness cannot endure the light. Since, indeed, such studies are scarcely worth the trouble if faults are not discovered and remedies recommended, the publication of each able report is likely to be met with more or less objection from those whose theory or practise it opposes. I know of one imitation college which, when its dishonest methods were displayed, served legal notice that the surveyors must pay damages for in any way injuring whatever the institution chose to consider its business. A single phrase from another study was for months a bone of contention between two supreme court justices, each supported by a group of captains of industry with their cohorts. Such tumult and shouting are often sufficiently disconcerting, but they soon die away and the truth transpires and prevails. Experience shows that threatened libel suits are never pressed against those who tell nothing but the truth, and that the favorite attack upon a survey, the charge that it is "self-appointed," can always be met in advance by making sure that the invitation to the undertaking is authoritative and representative.

Such loud reverberations, also, are often merely somewhat startling signs of public interest. Having been originally organized and being still generally sponsored by the consumers rather than the producers of education, surveys mark a new, important, and still increasing popular interest in the processes and results of the profession of teaching. People desire to be assured that the money they provide for education is well spent, and they often have decided opinions as to whether the training that their children receive is worth while. The ultimate aim of education being social, it is more than desirable for educators to be able to justify their work in the court of public opinion. Where, as recently in New York, the schools become a political issue, they may suffer serious injury unless the public is helped really to understand them.

III

So new and so popular a movement has inevitably developed a few surveyors who have assumed an attitude of

I am monarch of all I survey,
My right there is none to dispute.

A certain number of others complacently utter

An undisputed thing,
In such a solemn way.

The competence that is indispensable for a valuable result lies midway between these extremes. No subject touches life on more sides than education. Every educational question is related to economic, political, and social conditions. The educational problems of a state, a city, a single institution, are so complex and so intertwined with other relations that the wisest may well hesitate to attempt their solution. Observation must be patient and thorough. Conclusions of clarity and solidity result only from thorough consideration. Educational surveys made by young or inexperienced people, however gifted, or in the borrowed part-time of otherwise competent authorities, are rarely satisfactory. The number of those that are qualified to make educational surveys is exceedingly limited. They require not only unusual training and experience, but natural gifts of observation, penetration, and judgment which are more than rare. If the problem is extensive, a large staff of experts is required.

A thorough educational survey of any considerable body of material, moreover, requires ample time, frequently a year or a series of years. There is often pressure to have a report completed for presentation at some particular juncture—an anniversary, a sitting of a legislature, or what not. Such immediate usefulness, however, is far less important than the longer, almost unlimited influence which may be exercised by a thorough survey. Hurried, superficial, and ill-considered studies are worse than none. A sound study growing out of some immediate need may, however, provide not only specific aid, but also consideration and conclusion concerning fundamental matters.

The cost also of a thorough educational survey is considerable. Travel and study in the field are expensive. The time of competent men demands appropriate compensation. Suitable and wide publication is costly. Several surveys have cost fifty thousand dollars each, and they have been well worth the money.

In general, surveys have overemphasized the collection of facts. Some studies appear to have attempted, certainly they have accomplished, little else. Like all the other social sciences, education is already overburdened with facts. What is needed is not so much the collection of further data as more thorough consideration of the data that are already available. In the preparation of several studies that have been conspicuously useful, much less time and effort were expended in collecting material than in exhaustive consideration and complete testing of conclusions. Some helpful studies have been based entirely upon data that were already in print.

Conclusions are ordinarily safest if they accumulate inductively along with the collection and consideration of facts. Good results, however, have sometimes been obtained even by the adventurous method of adopting conclusions first and then finding facts to support them. Either method, or any other, is adequate, provided only that the conclusions truly represent the facts, and that the facts, like the colors of the famous painter, are thoroughly mixed with brains. One of the chief opportunities is that for suggestiveness, not only with regard to present details, but even more in indicating routes for future progress. A survey needs wide vision. A recent study which recommended a closer relation of the schools to their environment, was justly criticized for failing to recognize that one of the difficulties of the region was that, in the words of a local newspaper, it "had too much environment already."

Editing is of the greatest importance. Much material must be considered and, for a complicated problem, the assistance of numerous specialists is essential. The final report, however, is successful only as it is free from surplusage of detail and as all particular opinions are distilled together into a consistent and clear statement. It may perhaps take a Gladstone to make a

budget interesting; yet only a concise and readable report can minister judgment to the people through the popularizing of new facts and views. I have met no one who has succeeded in reading the 2,500 pages of the 1913 survey of the New York City schools, or the thousand wretchedly-printed pages of the 1914 survey of the University of Wisconsin. On the other hand, practically everybody who is interested in education has become familiar with the attractive little volumes of the Cleveland survey.

IV

Probably the most important of all of the results of the survey movement is the encouragement that it has given to the theory and practise of informed self-scrutiny. It is already becoming impossible to find time to examine all the surveys that appear; but a reading of the summaries of them that are provided by the United States Bureau of Education, a study of selected surveys, and a use of the increasingly available tests and scales, will enable any institution to emulate the helpful studies of their own problems made by Oberlin, the University of Illinois, Miami, and the College of the City of New York, and may even encourage them to follow the example of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in creating a permanent committee of introspection and appointing a permanent director of research for educational processes. Such officers have already rendered conspicuous service to the city school systems of Boston, New York, and New Orleans.

It may be asked, in conclusion, what all these surveys have to do with good teaching. The answer is: little directly, everything indirectly. Organization, theory, experiment, the example of great teachers, the test of public opinion, all have to do with good teaching. As for good teaching itself, we have no way of sharply defining and deliberately producing it. Good teaching is really like thinking, which, in Emerson's phrase, is "uncontrolled by will; we can only open our senses and clear away obstructions." In clearing away obstructions and opening the way for good teaching few implements have proved themselves more useful than the educational survey.

CLYDE FURST

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